

Senator HUMPHRIES (Australian Capital Territory) (10.28 p.m.)—This has been a major and eye-opening inquiry by the Community Affairs References Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to again have had the chance to take part in an inquiry of such significance. It is obvious, with burgeoning numbers of Australians who are reaching retirement age and becoming infirm, that issues to do with aged accommodation and services are going to be increasingly complex and important for bodies such as this chamber to deal with. The sheer pressure of that problem will occupy a very large amount of administrative time and money into the future. It is important that we set parameters for that process to succeed in overcoming problems associated with this sector.

It is important to note that the background to this report was a very significant infusion of additional dollars into the aged care sector in the last few years. In the last nine or 10 years, in fact, the amount that the Australian government has spent on providing services to older Australians, particularly in residential settings, has doubled. Of course, the population of Australians over the age of 65 has not doubled in that time. So this has represented a major exercise in starting to properly address an issue that, frankly, was not addressed adequately in the past.

There have been huge changes in the funding regime for aged care facilities, in the extent to which we expect standards to be maintained in those facilities—the establishment of the accreditation agency is a very important part of that process—and in the focus on particular problems within the nursing home setting, particularly dealing with the rising incidence of dementia. I pay tribute to successive ministers but particularly Minister Julie Bishop for the commitment that she has made to fund additional services in this area and to ensure that the sector is well enough resourced to be able to deal with much larger numbers of people coming through the doors of facilities and nursing homes in Australia, and has the capacity to provide better, high-quality services at the same time.

Last year's budget made some very significant changes with respect to the resourcing of aged care in Australia and provided a funding boost in a range of areas. The conditional adjustment payment of \$878 million was a very important step towards addressing the long-term problem of aged care facilities in this country not having the necessary resources to meet the increasing acuity of care required for their residents. I am very pleased that that has gone a very long way towards addressing issues such as the lack of wage parity between nurses in aged care settings and those in the acute care sector.

There was considerable debate before the committee about the extent to which the conditional adjustment payment and associated funding boosts by the Commonwealth might deliver a capacity to provide for wage parity in Australia. I note the views of the Australian Nursing Federation, which felt that the payments were sufficient to enable providers to meet that wage expectation but that there were mechanisms lacking to ensure that providers actually spent that additional money on urgent and high priorities such as

addressing wage disparity. I believe the evidence is that a great step can be taken in the direction of ensuring that we can attract and retain large numbers of high-quality nurses within that sector. I believe that the steps the government has taken will facilitate that occurring.

In my remarks today, I want to focus on the position of young people in nursing homes in Australia. I do not think it is too much of an exaggeration to describe the existence of large numbers of younger Australians in nursing homes in this country as a national disgrace. The committee was told that there were 6,000 people below the age of 65 in nursing homes and approximately 1,000 of those are below the age of 50. There is a lack of data on the exact conditions and disabilities that affect those people, but there is powerful evidence that many of them, perhaps an overwhelming majority, have a high level of cognitive awareness of their surroundings and are placed in completely inappropriate settings, where they are surrounded by people who are much older than them. These younger people consequently suffer from a lack of appropriate interaction with people their own age—with their peers. The step of removing them from that setting, where that is appropriate and where that is their desire, is a priority this committee strongly recommends. I believe that this issue must be addressed as a matter of public policy in this country, as a consequence of this report as much as anything else.

The committee did disagree to some extent on the question of where the onus for fixing that problem might lie. There was evidence, for example, about the benefits available to providers around this country through the aged care innovative pool funding, which is designed to offer the opportunity for an incentive payment or assistance in the cost of establishing alternative accommodation for younger disabled people outside of nursing homes. The committee were also informed that that pool, despite being provided by the federal government, was little used. In fact, we visited the only facility in Australia that at this stage has been funded from the pool—namely, the multiple sclerosis home at Carnegie in Melbourne, which was a great home to visit. The residents, who had only recently moved in at the time the committee arrived there, were delighted about their new accommodation option. What is disturbing is that the pool has not funded other facilities elsewhere in Australia when the need for such facilities is, frankly, acute.

I have no hesitation in urging state governments in this country to take a much higher profile on addressing these problems, accessing funding arrangements such as the innovative pool and moving those young people out of those nursing home facilities. It is simply unacceptable that so many should remain in those settings. Alternative options are already well demonstrated in this country and they must be taken up.

I think it is important to comment—and Senator McLucas has made this comment—that, as far as nursing homes in this country are concerned, a high standard has already been met. Most aged care facilities in this country offer an excellent standard of care, and this report should not be interpreted as an overall indictment or blot on the record of those homes. However, it is also

important to acknowledge that, with the huge pressures on nursing homes in this country by virtue of the large number of people who will be seeking accommodation there in the future, we need to ensure that standards are higher and that facilities are of an appropriate standard and level. It is also important to acknowledge that out-of-nursing-home aged care, such as that available through the HACC program, needs continued additional funding. The committee recommends that that continue to be supported by both state and federal governments.

I commend the staff of the committee for once again doing an outstanding job. It is no trade secret, so I confess that a very significant part of the work that goes into such reports is done by the staff. They always astonish us with the excellence of their contributions, and I thank them for what they have done on this report as on many others. I particularly want to thank Senator Sue Knowles for her contribution to this committee over many years. She has made an outstanding contribution in my time, and I know that contribution goes back long before my period on the committee. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.